

Rory Tell
Undergraduate Seminar

Shifting Attitudes on Masculinity in 1930s American Film

Introduction:

The interaction between politics and film in the 1930s is at the core of this work. In the thirties, the cultural significance of movies was strengthened by its connection to the political circumstances of the era. The year 1933 acts as a watershed moment: there was a Depression and a New Deal, there was a pre-code cinema (films made after the advent of sound in 1929, but before the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines) and a self-censored cinema (films made during Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines), and therein lies the symbolic connection of political history and film. The connection of these events requires further investigation, as film studios were not passive participants of New Deal culture; instead, there was a similar ideological function, and an interchange, between politics and films.

In the 1930s, Warner Brothers received worldwide recognition for the movies they had been producing. Harry Warner used his film's success to expand the company so that by the end of the decade, Warner Bros. owned 51 subsidiary companies, including 93 film exchanges and 525 theaters in 188 American cities.

Warner Bros. executives, and in specific, co-head of production and one of the founding members, Jack Warner, supported Franklin Roosevelt and the socially progressive platforms of the New Deal. The Warner brothers worked to help elect Roosevelt in 1932 by staging rallies for him in Los Angeles that they broadcasted over radio stations. They contributed to his campaign with financial and promotional support, and Roosevelt, in turn, promised to make Jack Warner the Los Angeles Chairman of the National Recovery Administration, which turned out to be a

key component of Roosevelt's New Deal. The brothers were often guests at the White House, providing a link between Washington and Hollywood. The men would remain friends long after Roosevelt's presidency was finished. Film scholar Giuliana Muscio noted, "Out of all the film industry, Warner Bros. can be said to be the only company that consistently produced films supporting the New Deal message and the administration's political interests between 1933 and 1942."¹

Film studios understood how the Depression was affecting America, and that movies were a central part of the American consciousness as over fifty million people went to the movies every week.² With advent of sound and color, there was a significant transformation for the people who made films and in the audience's perception of cinema. The film system absorbed the impact of radio and literature, and became the ultimate manifestation of American culture. As Andrew Bergman writes, "Everyone went to the movies during the Depression. Cinema was recognized as a necessity by the Hoover administration, which, in the midst of crisis, distributed food, clothing, and tickets to the movies."³ Lary May focuses on cinema as a key aspect of this cultural transformation:

"The movies were perhaps the most powerful national institution which offered private solutions to public issues. In other words, movies could not change society, but their form could infuse life with a new instinctual dynamism and provide a major stimulus for generating modern manners, styles, and models of physiological fulfillment."⁴

¹ Muscio, Giuliana. *Hollywood's New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Page 60.

² Frankel, Glenn. *High Noon: The Hollywood Blacklist and The Making of an American Classic*. S.l.: Bloomsbury, 2017. Page 33.

³ Bergman, Andrew. *Were in the Money: Depression America and its Films*. Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1992. Page 170.

⁴ May, Lary. *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Page 57.

Hollywood filmmaking in the 1930s offered that possibility of building a shared national culture because movies were the preeminent form of popular culture in the decade. The medium of films acted as a conduit for bringing culture and the ideals of the New Deal to a national audience. Film in the thirties could be re-interpreted as national cinema, in that it performed a crucial role in the cultural distribution and articulation of a national identity. Like the cultural politics of the New Deal, Hollywood cinema of the thirties revitalized Americanism in the depressed country. Screenwriter Dudley Nichols comments on how film acted as a moralizing experience, reassuring perceptions of socioeconomic realities and stressing the typical American values of faith, courage, and pragmatism:

“Artists sought to deepen our understanding of ourselves and society so that movie making was a tremendous educative force. What we see enacted we unconsciously relate to our immediate problems and draw practical conclusions... our exposure to the theatre is helping us to resolve our own conflicts and the conflicts of society by making us understand them.”⁵

Films alone did not simply reflect or transmit this ideological project. It was the combination of work between the representatives of dominant culture (film), the political establishment (government), and the body politic (public) that allowed for the dissemination of cinema as a means of creating a cultural establishment.

American masculinity in the 1930s was defined by massive unemployment, fears of feminine influence, and a new commercialized culture. The generation of men who were heralded as heroes for their service in World War I returned to an America buoyed by the prosperity of the war and America's economic dominance. However, these military men found

⁵ May, Lary. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Page 68.

themselves facing a massive shock, not only with their decreased financial status, but also with their manliness being called into question as a result of their inability to produce for their family. The election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, and the implementation of his legislative policy, “The New Deal,” in the spring of 1933, signaled to the nation that there was a president who understood their plight and recognized that men of all classes and ages were feeling crushed by the economic realities of the Depression. Roosevelt had to instill confidence within the nation, and especially in American men who were unemployed, by selling a program that embraced a culture of a diverse modes of masculinity.

The decisive contribution of film to the cultural transformation was the star system, which intensified the concept of personality. The renewal of the star system advanced a new definition of American identity.⁶ The thirties saw the rise of actors and stars that evoked new ethnic and racial stereotypes. Paul Muni and James Cagney were described respectively as “the American hero, whom ordinary men and boys recognize as themselves” and “[an actor] representing not a minority in action, but the action of the American majority.”⁷ This trend, to some degree, was a rejection against the exotic and aristocratic foreign stars that had dominated the screen in the 1920s.

Warner Bros. not only produced films that supported the New Deal, but in the process, was shaping an image of masculinity on screen that was more complex than the ideas that were espoused by the stars of the 1920s. This study will display how studios struggled at times to define an actor’s masculinity. There was not a clear and unified approach, but there was a general change in philosophy in the different types of masculinities that would be represented on

⁶ McDonald, Paul. *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities*. London: Wallflower Press, 2000. Page 101.

⁷ O'Connor, John E., and Martin A. Jackson. *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. Page 60.

screen. Male actors were no longer limited to playing the archetype of the “city boy” that Robert Sklar notes, as the studios crafted multifaceted and dynamic senses of manliness. The studios sought to differentiate themselves from the classical view of the American man as the self-centered, rugged individual, and shifted to a more expressive, complex middle-class worker.

Through a vertically integrated monopoly, Warner Bros. controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of their films. Thus, regular actors, and even stars, were at the will of the studio system, as they would have to sign long-term contracts with studios in order to be in their films. The film studios used these contracts to gain control over their actors, from the films they could perform in to their image on and off screen, and they even had the ability to change their name or appearance. Therefore, the studios and their directors were able to choose the roles male actors had, and in turn, started to redefine the idea of masculinity in film.

Robert Sklar’s *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* examines the creation of Hollywood in the early 1900s and extends all the way to the rise of the independent movie scene of the 1990s. Sklar’s work is a foundational piece of film history that discusses the transformative role of movies in shaping American culture. He observes how movies, almost immediately from the inception of Hollywood, became a significant means of cultural communication within America, and how movies themselves became an influential force within that culture. Sklar argues that while the years of 1930-1934 saw the rise of radical films, the Production Code ended progressive filmmaking for the rest of the 1930s and throughout the Depression. He analyzes the business models of studios and the development of masculinities on screen, arguing that the dominant type of masculinity promoted in the era was that of the “city boy.” He proposes that the elements that composed masculinity in films of the era were a combination of urban America and life on the frontier. Sklar’s book is a useful model to consider

how a studio might actively seek to craft a masculine image around a star both on and off screen. However, while Sklar's study is important for our understanding of a certain type of masculinity in the 1930s, his concept of the "city boy" does not address the broader range of masculinities that was prevalent in America during that decade.

Lary May, in *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*, acts as the counterpoint to Robert Sklar's vision of film in the 1930s by observing how film studios of the era were influential promoters of progressive politics: "From the late twenties to early thirties several fresh companies – Warner Brothers, Disney, Columbia, Radio Corporation of America – moved from marginal status to that of majors..." as they "featured stars that appealed predominantly to lower-income audiences."⁸ May's analysis provides the study with the viewpoint that the republicanism of the late 1930s, promoted by motion picture companies like Warner Bros., helped to build a nationwide constituency for liberal reform and developed visions of tolerance and social justice that were unprecedented at the time. May illustrates how Warner Bros. celebrated the idea of American masculinity being determined by a multitude of ideals: action, violence, struggle, and labor.

Dick Powell made his film debut in 1932, and became one of the most popular crooners in movies appearing in numerous Warner Bros. musicals throughout the 1930s. Growing up in Pittsburgh, he was recognized by a Warner Bros. talent scout for his tremendous singing ability. Part One of this investigation looks at how Powell shifted from the image of a beautiful and fastidious male singer to that of a young man struggling to survive in the economic realities of the Depression while trying to maintain a sense of optimism and belief that with hard work, great things are possible. Powell's connection to the youth serves to demonstrate how masculinities in

⁸ May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and The Politics of the American Way*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Page 61.

the 1930s were rapidly changing. By looking at Powell, I demonstrate how his on and off-screen persona was representative of young men, in particular, in their struggle to realize their own masculine potential in a manner that was in keeping with their own desires.

Paul Muni was a Chicago-born stage and film actor whose parents immigrated to America from Austria-Hungary. His ethnic background allowed him to play a multitude of parts, and it became part of the reason he developed into one of Warner Bros. most prestigious actors. Part Two of this investigation examines how Warner Bros. used a “prestige actor” like Muni to enhance the studio’s profile as a major player in the production of films. Muni was one of the few actors within the studio system model that possessed control of his career, and it was his ability to refuse some scripts, lobby for others, set his own working conditions, and ensure his own sense of self-worth that set him apart from so many other stars at Warner Bros. and in Hollywood. Muni recognized that it was more important to make films that spoke to the greater good of American audiences than to make films that were trivial and good for his career. Muni preferred to play middle-class ethnic characters, and his commercial success demonstrated how his roles resonated with movie audiences during the New Deal.

Film production in the 1930s had an effect on issues of economics, politics, and society. It was one of the factors that represented a more varied field of changing gender paradigms and perceptions of American masculinity. Rationalizing social dynamics, transmitting optimism to audiences, and representing middle class values of innocence, struggle, and labor, the film medium was an essential cultural agent during Roosevelt’s New Deal, as it shaped and reinforced modern views of masculinity. Warner Bros. was able to manifest the popular energies of American progressivism in the late 1930s through their depiction of masculinity with Dick Powell in *Gold Diggers of 1933* (LeRoy, 1933), *Happiness Ahead* (LeRoy, 1934), and *Broadway*

Gondolier (Bacon, 1935), and Paul Muni in *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932), *Bordertown* (Mayo, 1935), and *Black Fury* (Curtiz, 1935).

Part One: Dick Powell

Dick Powell's rise as a film star began during his early years in Warner Bros. movies as a young, attractive actor. Powell's films illustrate the ability of Warner Bros. to formulate an image of American masculinity as dynamic, hardworking, optimistic, attractive, and at times, even tender. It is true that "no movie star ever made a more radical change of image in mid-career than Dick Powell" when he became the epitome of the screen detective in the 1940s after having played the innocent boyish love interest in many musicals.⁹ However, Powell's career, and the films he made at Warner Bros. from 1932-1939, illustrated the shifting landscape of masculinity in film. John L. Marsh describes how Powell's beaming smile, exuberant charm, and positive view of life, love, and America reveal the importance of re-thinking the formation of New Deal masculinities:

"To American moviegoers of the 1930s, he was a 'charming youngster,' that nice guy down the street who was the nation's boyfriend: 'the kind of fellow you would like your sister to meet.' Singing and smiling his way through over thirty musical films, Dick Powell embodied for his generation what it meant to be young and healthy... and he was the very incarnation of America's adolescence."¹⁰

The types of masculinities enacted during the period of the New Deal could be described as aggressive, bold, and mutable, or on the other end of the spectrum, tender, romantic, and soft.

⁹ Thomas, Tony. *The Dick Powell Story*. Burbank, CA: Riverwood, 1993. Page 1.

¹⁰ Marsh, John L. "Dick Powell: Out Algering Horatio Alger." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1984). Page 244.

The former can be seen in the roles depicted by Errol Flynn, a fellow Warner Bros. contracted actor who never was able to outgrow his persona as the swashbuckling male. His performances in *Captain Blood* (Curtiz, 1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Curtiz, 1936), and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz, 1938) came to be recognized as some of the more popular films of the era, but ultimately they display Flynn's inability to outgrow his aggressive male persona. The latter depiction can be seen in the films of George Brent. He was one of the most popular actors of his era, and he appeared in some of the biggest movies of the decade. His frequent collaboration with Bette Davis in films like *Front Page Woman* (Curtiz, 1935) and *The Golden Arrow* (Green, 1936) demonstrated his incapacity to overcome his typecast as the softhearted male lead. Dick Powell's screen persona encompassed elements of both forms of masculinity, therefore illustrating the complexity of available screen masculinities during the 1930s, especially for youthful American men.

Warner Bros. was fully aware of the impact the Depression was having not only on a generation of men returning from World War I, but also on the youth of the decade. The Depression impacted America's young laborers, as "the increase in unemployment was greatest among young workers...the number of unemployed 14 to 24 year olds rose by 251% between 1930 and 1940."¹¹ The high level of unemployment among young men and women was viewed as a dangerous threat to the stability of the nation. Kriste Lindenmeyer notes in *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* that "by the early 1930s, for many Americans, an increasingly visible army of transient teens and youth in their early twenties underscored the worst consequences of the Depression for children, families, and the country's

¹¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population: Estimates of the Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment in the United States, 1940 and 1930, Washington, D.C., 1944.

future.”¹² Warner Bros. openly embraced the images and values of the Roosevelt Administration’s economic policies, especially the government’s emphasis on youth as the emblem of the nation’s future. Dick Powell represented the youthful face of America’s future: boyish, peppy, and the image of innocence.

Powell’s breakout movie that launched him into stardom was *Gold Diggers of 1933* (LeRoy, 1933). Powell received fifth billing in the credits, but his character of Robert Treat Bradford, a Bostonian blueblood writing popular music under the name of Brad Roberts, served as the ideological centerpiece of the film. Dick Powell’s image was used by Warner Bros. to sell him as the picture of the type of urban masculinity that was youthful and filled with promise in the film *Gold Diggers of 1933*. His character, Brad Roberts, is an example of the new type of young man in America. He is spunky, self-determined, capable, and considerate of other people’s plight, and he is often characterized in a way that makes him seem a bit naïve. This image of youthful screen masculinity connects Powell to other young male leads who appeared later in the decade, like Jimmy Stewart. However, unlike many other young men who are struggling to survive because of the Depression, Brad’s wealth and status allow him the time and opportunity to write music. Warner Bros. movies, like *Gold Diggers of 1933*, are not only set in the Depression, but they actively attempt to grapple with how the characters on screen, and in effect the audience, deal with issues of socio-economic circumstances. Film scholar Thomas Schatz recognized how Mervyn LeRoy, the director of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, steered films to resonate with audiences as a result of his “feel for the contemporary idiom and milieu – a sense of realism...”¹³

¹² Lindenmeyer, Kristen. *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005. Page 78.

¹³ Schatz, Thomas, and Steven Bach. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Page 140.

In one of the most important scenes of the film, Brad comes into an apartment, sits down at a girl's piano, and sings the only solo number he has in the whole film. The song is a number designed to showcase Powell's talents, and to highlight the image of masculinity as vigorous, romantic, and sexual. Brad becomes the object of the girls' gaze, as illustrated with the use of medium close-ups and extreme close-ups of his face, followed by cuts back to dreamy-eyed girls. The use of these shots by the cinematographer reflect the goal of Warner Bros. to emphasize Powell's image as young, innocent, and sexy. His innocence is the key to understanding the depiction of youth in the Depression. Powell's nature makes his character feel untouched by the effects of the Depression. The producer of the show, for whom Brad is singing, is unimpressed. He explains that he wants to create a show about the Depression and its effects. While chomping down on his cigar, he asks Brad, "Have you got something with a march effect to it?" Brad eagerly nods and says, "Yes...Remember My Forgotten Man." Brad begins to play the piano and talks about the inspiration for the tune. "I haven't any words to this yet...I just got the idea for it last night—watching the men on that bread line on Times Square—in the rain, standing in line for doughnuts and coffee—men out of a job...the soup kitchen."¹⁴ Brad may not understand the intimate effects of the Depression, but it is his sensitivity to the situation that allows him to be empathetic, and in the process, craft a song that depicts the horrors and frustrations felt by millions of American men. Barney, the producer, paces across the room listening intently and then exclaims:

"That's it. That's what this show is about. The Depression—men marching—marching in the rain— marching—marching—marching—doughnuts and crullers—jobs—jobs— marching— marching—marching—marching in the rain—and in the background will be

¹⁴ *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy and Busby Berkeley. USA: Warner Bros, 1933. Film.

Carol— spirit of the Depression—a blue song—no, not a blue song—but a wailing—a wailing and this woman—this gorgeous woman—singing this number that tears your heart out— the big parade—the big parade of tears.”¹⁵

Barney’s speech is designed to represent the fears of the people, and connects the sacrifices of the men in World War I with the drastic inability of men to find a sense of self-worth and purpose at this time. For those young men who do not possess Brad’s financial security, the Depression represents a looming presence that is sapping the nation of all sense of hope and opportunity. The film illustrates Warner Bros. approach in sympathizing with Depression era audiences. Warner Bros. was not interested in making only escapist films, rather they wanted to use movies to discuss current circumstances and struggles. Therefore, in examining the role of Brad, he is used to display the innocence of America’s youth, as well as their tribulations, during the Great Depression.

In his book *Showstoppers*, Martin Rubin argues that the song and the elaborate stage number that closes the film “stands as one of Hollywood’s most hard-hitting political statements of the 1930s, surpassed only by *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.”¹⁶ While the film clearly makes political statements with this number, and the opening musical score, it is also a film that explores the effects of the Depression on young people, and their prospects for future happiness. For Brad, the song represents his understanding of the crisis as he is emboldened by the effects of the Depression. His arc depicts youth’s inability to initially understand the effect the Depression has on the world. Yet, throughout the film, his innocence is transformed into knowledge as he declares his love for Polly, follows his dream, and in the end challenges the authority of his brother and the expectations of upper class society by writing and performing

¹⁵ *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy and Busby Berkeley. USA: Warner Bros, 1933. Film.

¹⁶ Rubin, Martin. *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and The Tradition of Spectacle*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Page 105.

popular songs. Powell's characterization in the film hinges on the depiction of youthful, masculinity that is compassionate and innocent; and most importantly, it reveals a man economically capable of providing opportunities for himself and others. On the surface, the film appears to be an escapist fare that celebrates young love. However, upon closer examination, the film is an example of how Warner Bros. attempted to display the growth of youth in America. The innocent young boy that Powell initially displays, and his transformation into understanding how the Depression has affected others, is representative of Warner Bros. fashioning an American youth fighting against the Depression.

By 1934, Powell had satisfied Warner Bros. executives that he was capable of carrying a film on his own, signaling that he had in fact become a star. To exhibit this new status, they cast him as the lead in *Happiness Ahead* (LeRoy, 1934). Powell replaced Jimmy Cagney as Bob Lane, and while it would have been interesting to see what the film would have been like with Cagney as the star, Powell captures the exuberant, boyish spirit of a young man who struggles to find love and respectability.

The film received modest praise from the critics. Mae Tinee, writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, called the film "a joyously human little affair concerned with the romance of a rich girl who falls in love with a poor boy, a Cinderella theme reversed...Dick Powell, who usually goes with Miss Ruby Keeler in pictures, performs in his usual, amiable fashion, caroling melodiously when script demands. As usual you don't care a lot for him at first, but end by liking him much."¹⁷ Louella Parsons, in her review, echoed Tinee's point about the film being a modern day Cinderella tale. She noted that the film "has the same homely charm that made 'It Happened One Night' one of the most talked of pictures last year...confidentially those who like realness and

¹⁷ "Critics Regret This Cast Had Poor Scenario" Mae Tinee *Chicago Tribune* May 27, 1936.

down to earth drama will get their money's worth.”¹⁸ In connecting the film to Capra's big hit, *It Happened One Night*, Parsons is selling the film as an example of a mid-1930s comedy using romance to address conflicts of class. However, where Clark Gable's character, Peter Warne, is the model of an aggressive, sullen masculinity, Powell's is that of the all-American boy. Parsons points this out in her discussion of his performance stating that he “beautifully plays a nice wholesome boy and does it in a convincing manner...the part sort of belongs to him.”¹⁹ The image of an attractive, innocent young man who fights through his naivety with sheer will and determination, as characterized by the critics of Powell's performance, is the very image that Warner Bros. used to build his star potential.

While in *Happiness Ahead* Powell is emblematic of middle class masculinities, in *Broadway Gondolier* (Bacon, 1935), he represents the hopes and dreams of working class men who long for an opportunity to create their own life, and control their own labor. The film is a spoof of radio in the mid 1930s and its effects on the nation. The film opens with a performance of Rigoletto in an opera house in a big city. After the show is over, the camera focuses in on two theater critics complaining about the performance. As they are riding along, arguing about Rigoletto and how to write up the event, they overhear the cab driver Richard Purcell, played by Dick Powell, singing. As they continue to debate the opera, he begins to sing one of the key songs. The men are greatly impressed by his vocal skills, which Purcell demonstrates for them as they sit in traffic. His singing further exacerbates the traffic jam when he fails to see the cop waving him to continue on. The officer tries to ticket Purcell for not paying attention, but he explains that he was singing the “quartet from Rigoletto” which the critics had forgotten. The cop starts arguing about the song with Purcell after telling the men that they in fact do not know

¹⁸ “Gossip Column Story admirably depicted in Film” Louella Parsons Los Angeles Examiner September 2, 1932.

¹⁹ “Gossip Column Story admirably depicted in Film” Louella Parsons Los Angeles Examiner September 2, 1932.

the structure of the quartet in the opera. The officer smiles, and begins to sing the number with intense concentration, and then Purcell joins him as the men accompany him. The men sing and perform together for a few minutes, enjoying the music, until they are interrupted by the sound of honking car horns as they have totally stopped the flow of traffic. This interaction between the gatekeepers of culture (the critics), the laborers of America (the cabbie), and the institution of law (the police office), is used to illustrate how elements of high culture in America have been embraced by elements of the low culture. This is an attempt to show that the difference between the two worlds is not so clear-cut, especially in representations of masculinity.

Powell would make six more films for Warner Bros: *Varsity Show* (Keighley, 1937), *Hollywood Hotel* (Berkeley, 1937), *Cowboy from Brooklyn* (Bacon, 1938), *Hard to Get* (Enright, 1938), *Going Places* (Enright, 1938) and *Naughty but Nice* (Enright, 1939). Powell and Warner Bros. ended their relationship in December of 1938 when the company allowed his contract to expire. With Dick Powell, Warner Bros. had been able to capitalize on the image of youthful American masculinities that represented the changing dynamics of man's relationship to the world. As the youthful, boyish face of "New Deal" optimism, and the melodic, sweet voice of the crooner, Powell was the embodiment of the innocent youth and their transformation into better understanding the effects of the Depression.

Part Two: Paul Muni

Paul Muni's ability to depict ordinary people and act as a representative of middle class American society is what drew Warner Bros., and movie audiences, to his film persona. He was born Muni Weisenfreund in Lemberg, Austria-Hungary on September 22, 1895. Immigrating to America at a young age, he lived and worked on Broadway for many years. An accomplished and hard-working actor, Muni left the New York stage in 1928 for Hollywood. After working in

a few films produced by Fox Studios, Muni's ability to depict ordinary people from the streets interested Warner Bros., so they signed him in 1932. Muni claimed that his inspiration for his characters and performances at Warner Bros. was "taken from the street, real types everyone recognizes."²⁰ By signing Muni, Warner Bros. acquired a performer who had gained a great amount of respect and attention for his work in the theatre, as well as for his budding film career.

Muni's stardom and image also represents the complexities Warner Bros. faced in trying to market him as representative of a masculine experience within America in the 1930s because Muni was a fierce worker and disliked the idea of the movie star. Warner Bros. sought to make Muni into a huge celebrity via many different avenues, but Muni's control of his image, the performances, and the stories made it more difficult for Warner Bros. to market him as a star. Muni was very socially conscious and did not want to be fashioned as a star, as he grew up a middle-class man and understood the troubles that people were facing in the Depression. Muni's career does not follow the framework of the typical movie star in the 30s. Warner Bros. was unsure of how to market Muni because he constantly reminded them and the press that he was not a star, but an actor. Muni first expressed this image of himself stating in a press release: "No! The mere idea of becoming an acting robot at the beck and call of a studio is too terrible even to think about! No more long term contracts."²¹ Muni understood the studio system well and wanted to have control over the movies he was in. His popularity helped him achieve this goal, as Muni was first signed to a one-picture contract that was one of the most unusual and exclusive contracts for any leading person working within the confines of the Hollywood studio system in 1932. The contract for his services paid him \$15,000 a month, and it also stipulated that he was to work no more than twelve hours a day or seventy hours a week. The deal also provided him

²⁰ Lawrence, Jerome. *Actor: The Life and Times of Paul Muni*. New York: Samuel French, 1984. Page 170.

²¹ Lawrence, Jerome. *Actor: The Life and Times of Paul Muni*. Page 174.

with the right to refuse stories, and only required that he make one film a year. Additionally, it ensured Warner Bros. that they had exclusive rights to his name and likeness for advertising his films, but both parties would share commercial advertising rights. This deal made Muni one of the most powerful and highly paid actors in Hollywood, and ensured that he would maintain control of his career and image.

In their early 1930s films, Warner Bros. crafted an image of America where the working classes faced the challenges of living within an urban environment. The choice to represent the facets of urban life was made in response to the influx of people leaving their rural homes and choosing to live in the cities where there was a higher chance of economic prosperity. The heroes of their films were gangsters, secretaries, reporters, detectives, and killers because all of these types were part of the urban landscape that was marred by corruption, crime, and immorality. Ethan Mordden noted that, “Warner’s people could be the men and women you passed in apartment hallways, dressed so, lit so, speaking so.”²² In effect, Warner Bros. differentiated itself from the other major studios by making films that spoke to present-day concerns and displayed masculinities in urban environments. It was the role of James Allen, played by Paul Muni, in *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* that exhibited Warner Bros. vision in the way that the experiences of a single man were used to show the horrors faced by contemporary society. This film determined the future trajectory of Muni’s career at Warner Bros., and how they handled the depiction of his masculinity on and off screen.

I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang (LeRoy, 1932) traces the rise and fall of James Allen as he returns from World War I. For many film scholars and historians, it is this film that defines Warner Brothers’ house style, and demonstrates the studio’s ability to make socially conscious

²² Mordden, Ethan. *The Hollywood Studios: Their Unique Styles during the Golden Age of Movies*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. Page 221.

films. The movie proved important for Muni, as it earning him a nomination for Best Actor at the 1932-1933 Oscars. This film in many ways acts as a transition between the image of masculinity as that of the self-made man, and that of masculinity as compassionate and cooperative.

I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang was designed to be a socially conscious film, as executives and personnel from Warner Bros. claimed that the film tackled the difficult experiences of American men, especially veterans of World War I, who struggled to find dignity and a means of economic survival in their return home. Muni proclaimed of the part, “I would be something less than human not to have seized the chance to expose such evil in *I am a Fugitive*.”²³ The evil that Muni speaks of is the inhumane treatment that men faced in a country that allowed the usage of chain gangs, and the harsh measures like sweat boxes and whips that were used to discipline prisoners.

In the opening sequence of the film, a variety of masculine depictions are represented. The audience is provided with distinct views of American masculinities through both dialogue, and the way characters are positioned within the frame. This scene displays Allen’s division returning to America from the European front. The first masculine perspective presented is that of a young Texan who proclaims loudly in a medium close-up that, “if I ever I get back to Texas on that range again, the first man who says inspection to me, he’s just going to be S.O.L. because he’ll hear my six-shooter. And I mean sure enough too.”²⁴ The masculinity represented by the Texan is one based on rugged individualism, where problems are solved with violence and action, rather than discussion. Another masculine perspective that is displayed is that of an older vaudeville

²³ O'Connor, John. *I Am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, Madison: Wisconsin Warner Bros. Screenplay Series. Wisconsin, 1981: University of Wisconsin Press. Page 41.

²⁴ *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Warner Bros, 1932. Film.

performer who is shown in a medium close-up in his bunk with his hands cradled beneath his face and his fingers resting on his cheeks. He looks as if he is dreaming rather than paying attention to the scene. He tells the other men that he is returning to “vaudeville with my old lion-taming act.”²⁵ His perception of masculinity is played for laughs. Muni’s style of performance, and the way in which Allen’s character is written, combine elements of both of these men. In a medium close-up, Muni is framed in a way in which he is talking to his friends and to the audience directly stating, “I know what I’m gonna do...get me some kind of construction job...being in the engineering corps has been a swell experience and I am making the most of it.” In a following medium long shot he tells them all that, “you can bet your little tin hat Mr. James Allen won’t be back in the grind of a factory.”²⁶ As he completes the line, he stands up, straightens his shoulders and returns above deck. Muni’s declaration that he is no longer willing to be defined by wage labor speaks to the economic problems of the times.

Later in the film, as Allen experiences life on a chain gang as a result of unfortunate events, he is reduced to nothing more than a number in a mass of other men. Both white and African-Americans in the chain gang share the sole purpose of working hard and learning to accept the authority of the system. The film emphasizes that these are difficult conditions for any man to bear, but for a man like Allen, prison is too much to bear because he is unwilling and unable to let someone else determine his destiny. This theme is consistently highlighted throughout the film; and, it is in the prison camp where society tries to break down Allen’s resolve to resist the expectations and power of institutions.

²⁵ *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Warner Bros, 1932. Film.

²⁶ *I am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Warner Bros, 1932. Film.

In the final scene, Allen's status as a self-made man is challenged when he emerges from the shadows outside of his former girlfriend's home as she drives her car into the garage. A voice off camera whispers "Helen, Helen," and this startles her until she sees Jim step into the light. He quickly grasps her shoulders and pulls them into the shadows. He tells her that even though he has escaped he is still not free because he cannot keep a job, or find peace of mind. He tells her that he must keep moving and that he hates everything except for her. As Muni delivers this line he has a look of despair and intense anxiety on his face. The bleakness of this ending can be read as the moment that captures the inability of so many men to find justice and self-confidence in 1932 America. By the end of the film, Allen is beaten into submission and destroyed by the system, even though he has desperately tried to create a space for himself where his masculinity is self-determined. He is reduced to a cog within a societal system that emasculates him because he cannot work, and he lacks a voice that represents his feelings about America and its promise of a better life for everyone.

In Muni's performances in *Bordertown* (Mayo, 1935) and *Black Fury* (Curtiz, 1935) he was able to create two very distinct and realistic presentations of ethnic masculinities. The roles of Johnny Ramirez and Joe Radek demonstrate how Hollywood attempted to deal with issues of race, class, and ethnicity in an evolving American identity. These roles allowed him to display his wide range of ability, and also spoke to his need to act in films that addressed larger social issues, such as racism in the case of *Bordertown* and labor struggles in *Black Fury*. These films were shot back to back in 1934, a year that was a high water mark for Muni for two reasons. First, he acted in multiple films in a single year for the first time. Second, Muni signed a new contract on March 16, 1934, committing himself to Warner Bros. for the next seven years. In offering this lucrative new contract to Muni, Warner Bros. demonstrated their belief in Muni's

stardom and solidified his importance to the company. This clearly illustrated that Warner Bros. was committed to other forms of screen masculinity than that of the “city boy” that Sklar argues was the dominant type of masculinity in film in the 1930s.

In the film *Bordertown* Muni plays Johnny Ramirez, a poor Mexican-American in Los Angeles who graduates from Pacific Night Law School after having worked during the day as a mechanic. Muni’s portrayal of a young Mexican-American who struggles against the forces of prejudice and economic privilege reflect lower, working class people fighting for a voice in America. Ramirez is used to demonstrate the difficulties that resulted from being viewed as ethnic or “raced” in America in the 1930s. Johnny’s struggles to achieve respectability and wealth display how “whiteness” functions to limit the potential assimilation for some groups on the basis of class, race, and gender.

The film is also important in that it speaks to a willingness to address issues of racism through the lens of masculinity. While this film ultimately depicts an image of racialized masculinities that is at times prejudicial, Muni’s role as Johnny represents one of the few attempts in a movie during the thirties to even speak to issues of race in connection with the New Deal.

A judge, who is the guest speaker at Johnny’s graduation, functions to provide background on Johnny’s past, and his lecture comments on the nature of American masculinity and the idea of the American dream. When he begins the speech, he is framed in a medium straight angle shot so that it appears as if he is looking directly at the audience, as well as the men in the room. This is a technique used commonly in Warner Brother’s films to communicate to the audience that a monologue is of significant cultural importance. The judge proclaims:

“He [Johnny] had the courage to lift himself above his environment to overcome handicaps that were certain to make him a criminal. I reveal no secrets when I say to you that this young man was the tough guy of a tough neighborhood. At an age when most young boys were in high school, he was a child problem. A problem to which his parents had no solution, but they didn’t need it.”²⁷

The judge’s address is illustrative of how “whiteness” impacts the formation and understanding of race relations in America. The judge believes his speech to be celebratory of the achievements of these young men, despite their racialized identities. However, his words are tinged with racism when he explains that Johnny was able to “lift himself above his environment” and avoid becoming a criminal. The indication is that because of his status as a lower class citizen, and his race as Mexican-American, Johnny is predisposed to a life of crime and violence. The judge smiles and points towards Muni’s character, which is followed by a medium close-up of Muni with slick black hair, dark skin, dark rings around his eyes, and a look of pride on his face. The combination of the make-up with Muni’s steely gaze quickly informs the viewer that his is a form of “raced masculinity,” and that he is also a man of fierceness. In effect, the judge is basing his assessment of the men on a belief in the 1930s that racial masculinities were different and more volatile than white masculinities.

Black Fury was partly based on the murder of a coal miner by company police in Imperial, Pennsylvania in 1929. Muni, who was constantly on the lookout for politically active or socially suitable themes along with his brother-in-law, Abem Finkel, lobbied the studio to transform the story into a movie. Film historian Peter Stead in *Film and the Working Class* argues that, “*Black Fury* could only have been made at Warner Bros., a studio which had firmly

²⁷ *Bordertown*. Directed by Archie Mayo. USA: Warner Bros, 1935. Film.

aligned with Roosevelt and the New Deal, and which quite clearly believed that there was a market for films which dealt with topical issues... and matters of social justice.”²⁸

The film was the only Warner Bros. picture of the decade to address the question of unionization and industrial unrest. It attempted to speak to these controversial issues, and their impact on American masculinity. Muni's character, Joe, is illustrative of how issues of class and marginalization can impact the formation of masculinity. Joe's status as a laborer, along with his ethnicity, marginalize him within white society because he is revealed as someone who does not possess the necessary capital to engage with consumerism, nor does he have the required intelligence to be a contributing member of society. *Black Fury* shows an image of the labor movement that is complicated at a time when many Americans feared the rise of organized labor. For Muni, his desire to make films of real social value would be transformed from the contemporary experiences of a Mexican-American lawyer to a Polish miner struggling against the forces of racism and corruption.

In all of these performances, Muni struggled against the needs of Warner Bros. to make him into another run-of-the-mill star. Muni was both a figure of Hollywood prestige and American social value, and it was those qualities that defined his persona throughout the 1930s. In portraying characters that represented the image of American masculinity as ethnically diverse and middle class in nature, Muni's performances show how the New Deal impacted the formation of American male identities on and off screen.

Conclusion:

In this study, I have examined how Warner Bros. worked to build images of screen masculinity that depicted the ever-changing nature of manliness in Hollywood in the 1930s and

²⁸ Stead, Peter. *Film and The Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Routledge, 2015. Page 63.

in America as a result of the Great Depression. In looking at how the studio handled the development of various “styles” of masculinity in relation to issues of race, class, and gender, I have demonstrated that Sklar’s notion that the “city boy” was the dominant type of masculinity featured at the studio offers a limited view of the types of masculinity that were actually present in 1930s cinema. What is evident from looking at how Warner Bros. dealt with the formation of the manly images of Dick Powell and Paul Muni is that masculinity was something that was constantly in flux, sometimes contradictory, and more complex than previous scholars have acknowledged.

Part of this complexity arose when Warner Bros. adopted Roosevelt’s new vision of America, which was more progressive than his predecessor’s, Herbert Hoover. The defeat of Hoover, along with the implementation of Roosevelt’s “New Deal” legislation, was instrumental in the shaping of screen masculinity at Warner Bros., and it also impacted how the company depicted American experience onscreen. The company tried to recognize the difficulties of the both the nation, and American men, as it was no longer possible for people to locate a sense of identity in their jobs, authority in the home, or self-worth. Still, Warner Bros. strived to fashion characters that illustrated the intricate nature of American masculinity, as it reacted to the transformations that occurred as a result of the Great Depression that were marked by massive unemployment, fear of governmental authorities, questions about race, and anger over the role of wealthy Americans. In looking outwards to the present state of American cinema, this dynamic change in the way studios reacted to the New Deal parallels how the film world is currently responding to issues of race and the presidency of Donald Trump. Arthouse films like *Moonlight* and *Get Out*, along with the blockbusters *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle in Time*, display a drastic change in the type of people getting roles, and the archetypes they represent.

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